Scope and use of digital plan data platforms in Europe

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Scope and use of digital plan data platforms in Europe

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In the past decade, many European countries have taken significant steps towards setting up digital plan registers and digitize spatial planning processes. However, comparative evidence on the possibilities offered by digital plan data and their actual use is missing. At the same time, the digitization of plan data can be assumed to have a considerable impact on planning practice.

ESPON DIGIPLAN (Evaluating Spatial Planning Practices with Digital Plan Data) will look both at the provision/production side, i.e. how plans are digitally represented, and at the user/consumption side, i.e. how plan data are used and how they influence planning practice.

Driven by slightly different questions but a shared interest, stakeholders in Denmark, Norway and Switzerland asked ESPON to help them with a targeted analysis.

At two meetings in Copenhagen, stakeholders and the research team intensely discussed the planned analysis, and the appetite of both stakeholders and the research team for the analysis is still growing. Both stakeholders and researchers expect interesting and eye-opening results with this targeted analysis and are happy to share their first insights. More will follow next winter.

What is digital plan data?

Digital plan data may refer to information about the content of plans and the planning process. In a narrow sense, we can define digital plan data as geodata combined with planning regulations and intentions, saved in digital plan repositories or registers. However, these registers play various roles in the planning process of different countries. For example, a plan register can be primarily for information purposes, displaying information over a publicly available portal collected by a central authority. It can also be a system supporting the planning process, used by municipalities to produce their plans, communicate them to other authorities and organise hearing processes. It can even act as the sole repository of legally binding planning regulations. There are many variations across types of plans and countries. Two examples from the project are described below: information on Norway and Switzerland is still being collected, so we consider the examples of Luxembourg and Denmark.

Digital plan data registers in Luxembourg

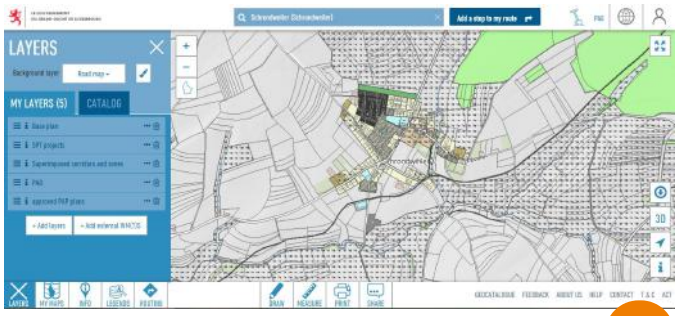
The ongoing process of the digitalisation of plan data in Luxembourg, driven by the Ministry of the Interior, started four years ago. The main purpose was to create an open access geodatabase containing plan data at both municipal and national levels on a single platform. The standardisation and automatised assessment (e.g. shape, superposition) of the input data has contributed to better workflows in the planning process. They have also facilitated the creation of a high-quality dataset of comparable plan data nationwide. Currently, local plan data for a third of the 102 municipalities are available on the platform (map.geoportail.lu/theme/pag). Full coverage is expected by early 2022.

The availability of such country-wide plan data would allow, for instance, the share of constructible areas and its evolution over time to be easily calculated. Such information is of interest not only for the Ministry of the Interior, but also for others working with analysis, e.g. on impact assessment, of municipal and national planning. One of the added values of the digital platform containing plan data is that it generates a report that gathers all planning regulations affecting any particular parcel included on the platform. This reduces the workload for municipalities, which before would have had to extract such information manually.

Digital plan data registers in Denmark

In the 1990s, the first ideas of a digital plan register were discussed by some municipalities and the national planning authority in Denmark. In 2006, the first Danish digital plan register was established. Today, it includes all plans covered by the law on planning, ranging from national directives such as the Finger Plan to local development plans created by municipalities, covering, for example, new residential areas. The data include geodata, e.g. more than 100 000 currently effective municipal plan zone polygons, with information on regulations, but also the actual plans as PDF files. The latter is (still) the legally binding version of the plan. Municipalities are required by law to upload their data and plans to the register, while the national planning authority (the Danish Business Authority) maintains the system. All data are publicly accessible and downloadable through a map and database portal. It is worth mentioning that the Danish planning law focuses on the planning process and thus no map symbols are defined in the law. This means the municipalities have different ways of defining regulations and intentions in their plans, which requires flexible definitions in the plan register.

Recently, the register was significantly extended, with more detailed information being added. This was driven by the Danish tax authority, which will use the data as input for a new assessment of property values, planned to start in autumn 2020. This latest change is particularly interesting, as the digital plan data register will directly affect other areas, in this case the property tax that land owners have to pay, even though the registered information is not legally binding in itself, but instead is a required representation of the legally binding plan version, the attached PDF document.

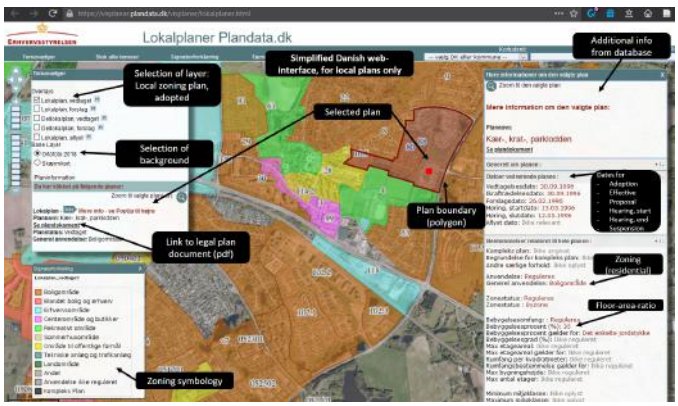


Integration of plan data and impacts on planning practice

Increasing digitalisation and the increasing availability of plan data also lead to integration with other sectors. Data from the system, which was built (and the data defined) mainly for planning professionals, can be used in other contexts. This requires high-quality data but also gives rise to questions regarding the system's impact on planning practice.

One could imagine a more conservative approach to planning. On the other hand, comprehensive information on plans and plan proposals can improve the work of many stakeholders.

It can also increase transparency by making planning and its results available for public debates. In ESPON DIGIPLAN, we will explore these questions over the summer and autumn, providing an overview of 15 ESPON countries and in-depth case studies for six of them (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway and Switzerland).



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